

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S VOICES: USING PRIMARY SOURCES TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO THE CIVIL WAR

By Benita R. Dillard

There hadn't been too many other options. We couldn't tell how many people were shooting at us. It could have been hundreds judging by the amount of fire. However many there were, they wanted us dead and they surrounded us. No one shooting at us was wearing a uniform. They were just men, most of them in Western clothes-shirts, jeans, athletic shoes. Some wore traditional robes and sandals. It wasn't the army I had expected to call an enemy in this fight. They were just men, angry, screaming, deadly men who outnumbered us in a big way and they were killing us, killing my friends.

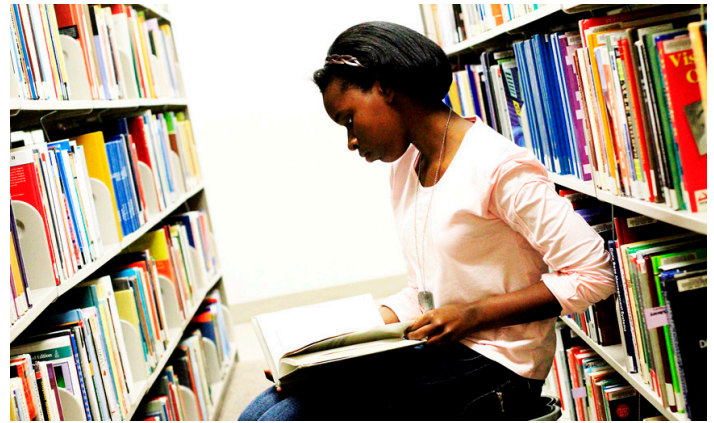
-Shoshana Johnson¹

I read aloud the above excerpt from Shoshana Johnson's autobiography, *I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home*, to my ninth-grade English students. I wanted to see what my students knew about a more recent historical event prior to starting the unit on African American women's contributions to the Civil War using primary sources. As an English teacher and researcher interested in African American women's history, I design lessons to show students how certain aspects of language arts and history overlap.

After reading this excerpt, I had students write for three minutes on the following questions:

1. Where did this event take place?
2. When did it take place?
3. Who were involved?
4. What would you do in this situation?

Once students finished journaling, I mentioned Ms. Johnson's name. The class could not recall her name, but they were familiar with the Iraq War. I explained to them that, while fighting for our freedom and protection in the Iraq War, Ms. Johnson became the first African American woman prisoner of war. After explaining Ms. Johnson's contribution to the Iraq War, we watched an interview of Shoshana Johnson found on CNET TV Website: (http://cnettv.cnet.com/former-pow-shoshana-johnson/9742-1_53-50006731.html).



African American women's contributions to wars, particularly the Civil War (1861-1865), are rarely recorded in school textbooks. According to Geneva Gay, an internationally recognized scholar in multicultural education, most textbooks used in schools confirm the status, culture, and contributions of the dominant group (European Americans).² Scholar and historian Ella Forbes argued that in the case of Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth, their stories are usually told from the perspective of the White male participant which prevailed when the Civil War is discussed. When the African American Civil War participation is discussed, the African American male is highlighted.³

In my class, however, I asked students to discuss their prior knowledge about Harriet Tubman; some mentioned that they read about Ms. Tubman's Underground Railroad, while others had never heard the name. Collectively, the class did not know Ms. Tubman served in many roles in the Civil War, particularly as a spy, because she knew it would lead to the abolition of slavery. Many students were surprised to hear about the many contributions made by Ms. Tubman and other African American women during wartime.

Because most school textbooks offered an interpretation of history by people who did not witness the event or live through it, I designed a lesson that offered opportunities for students to read primary sources (e.g., letters, diaries, manuscripts, journals, images, autobiographies, etc.) written by African American women who actually experienced, lived through, and made contributions to the Civil War. Exposing students to primary sources enabled them to read the untold stories, the stories often omitted from school textbooks. More importantly, some researchers found that providing students with opportunities to read primary sources allowed them to become a part of the "historical moment," engaging in critical conversations that positioned them as "historical actors" with "real voices who can identify and connect with history."⁴ Reading primary sources provided the tools and evidence needed to move

students from the position of passive reader to active participant in making informed statements about the world in which they live. In particular, historical primary sources offered opportunities for students to determine what the documents could tell them about a past event, and then decide whether they agreed with the interpretation offered by the textbook's author. In sum, providing opportunities for students to read primary sources allows them to see that it is not the same as reading a textbook.

Notes

1. Johnson, S. Johnson & M.L. Doyle. *I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), accessed August 31, 2010, http://cnettv.cnet.com/former-pow-shoshana-johnson/9742-1_53-50006731.html
2. Gay, Geneva. *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.
3. E. Forbes. *African American Women during the Civil War* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.
4. Thombs, M., Gillis, M. and Canestrari, A. *A Culturally Responsive Approach: Using Web-Quests in the Social Studies Classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.



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LESSON PLAN
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Connections to Secondary School

Students seldom have opportunities to use primary sources to move toward a more proactive examination of what is written in school textbooks. In addition, students are often subjected to class lectures, which are defined by Paulo Freire as the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action for students extended only as far as “receiving, filing, and storing the deposit.” Exposing students to primary sources written by African American women involved in military activities during the Civil War affords opportunities to investigate, interpret, and take on roles of these women through the Dinner Party strategy. This strategy suggested by authors Readence, Bean, and Baldwin in 2004, is highly engaging and based on the idea that a person can invite characters or historical figures to their home for dinner and conversation. This strategy offers opportunities for these women to have a voice. More importantly, Dinner Party can lead students to creative dramatic performances and engaging follow-up discussions aimed at considering both the historical figure’s voice and the textbook documentation of the event.

Goals

Students will gain knowledge of the significant contributions made by African American women who served actively in the military during the Civil War.

Objectives

Students will read and analyze primary sources and other documents about African American women who served in the Civil War:

- Harriet Tubman,
- Sojourner Truth,
- Maria Lewis,
- Mary Elizabeth Bowser,
- Elizabeth Draper Mitchell,
- Susie King Taylor, and
- Mary Ann Shadd Cary

Students will take on the role of specific women actively involved in the Civil War.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues.

History

- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past.

- Assist learners in developing historical research capabilities that enable them to formulate historical questions, obtain historical data, question historical data, identify the gaps in available records, place records in context, and construct sound historical interpretations.

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards

- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (Standard 4)
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (Standard 11)

Activity

1. Decide which African American women involved in the Civil War will be part of a panel discussion. About 5-6 women, including some whose voices are silent in textbooks, will be enough. If possible, multiple small groups should take place at the same time during Dinner Party discussion.

Optional: Have students bring snacks or provide snacks for the students to eat during the dinner party.

2. Assign one of the group members the role of moderator.
3. Provide initial prompt questions to get the discussion going.
3. Use an excerpt or passage from a letter, autobiography, or journal entry that entices students into the discussion.
4. Debrief at the end of the role-playing to illuminate important issues that were revealed in the discussion and any content concepts that were considered.

Dinner Party

Summary:

Harriet Tubman, short and slight at five feet tall, belied the strong physique and endurance doing “man’s work” while enslaved. William Still, an abolitionist from Philadelphia aided Tubman when she helped enslaved Africans to escape. He once said, “Harriet was a woman of no pretensions, indeed, a more ordinary specimen of humanity could hardly be found among the most unfortunate-looking farm hands of the South. Yet, in point of courage, shrewdness and disinterested exertions to rescue her fellow-men... she was without her equal” (Forbes 1998, 37).

This illustration of Dinner Party involves three major players. One student volunteers to read a passage from Ms. Tubman’s letter to “Boston Friends” written June 30, 1863 in Beaufort, South Carolina. One student volunteers as the recipient of the letter, and a third serves as the moderator.

Tubman wrote this letter to a friend to discuss one of her most successful missions. The key points of this letter are that 756 enslaved Africans on the Combahee River fled to Union lines in South Carolina and thousands of dollars worth of Confederate supplies and equipment were destroyed (Forbes 1998).

Passage from Harriet Tubman’s letter to “Boston Friends:”

You have, without a doubt seen a full account of the expedition I refer to. Don’t you think we colored people are entitled to some credit for that exploit, under the lead of the brave Colonel Montgomery? We weakened the rebels somewhat on the Combahee River by taking and bringing way seven hundred and fifty-six head of their most valuable livestock, known up in your region as “contrabands,” and this, too, without the loss of a single life on our part, though we have good reason to believe that a number of rebels bit the dust (Ripley 1985, 220-221).

Prompt Questions:

1. What feelings does she express and/or reveal? Is she embittered, ennobled, vengeful, grateful, resigned, determined, conflicted, or proud?
2. What advice would you give Ms. Tubman?

Assessment

1. Students will demonstrate their understanding of primary sources, their historical relevance, and their personal significance through creative dramatic performances that require them to take on the roles of those that have been historically silenced.
2. Rephrase questions found under the section titled, “The Making of an African American Identity Volume I: 1500-1865” on the National Humanities Center Website (<http://www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org>) by substituting the African American male reference with the female. Have students compare African American women’s experiences in the Civil War with African American men fighting in the same war.
3. Have students identify who has a voice in the textbook discourse on the Civil War? Who does not have a voice? Explain why?

Teacher’s Resources

1. John E. Readence, Thomas W. Bean, and R. Scott Baldwin, *Content Area Literacy: An Integrated Approach* (Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2004).
2. C. Peter Ripley ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers: Volume 5, The United States, 1859-1865* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
3. National Humanities Center. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/>
4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
5. <http://www.harrietubman.com/cwoodhtml>.
6. Sojourner Truth Institute of Battle Creek. www.sojournertruth.org.
7. W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research. <http://dubois-online.org/> (see biography of Mary Elizabeth Bowser at this website).
8. Susie King Taylor, *A Black Woman’s Civil War Memoir*, (New Jersey: M. Wiener Publishers, 1999).
9. Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998).